

“A Long Obedience in the Same Direction”

19 June 2022 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: You Are My All In All

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Matthew 14:1-33

Sermon:

Apologies for the long reading again this week. The bit I want to concentrate on is the part in the boat, the whole walking on water scene. The reason I read all of chapter 14 is to set the walking on water in context so that we can get a better grasp of what exactly is going on here.

I'm sure we've all heard this passage preached on many times and it's probably been one of those 'get out of the boat' messages. You know the one – the call to take a step of faith and keep our eyes on Jesus rather than the storm?... It suggests that we most commonly imagine ourselves as Peter in this story – or even that we *should* see ourselves as Peter... but what if that isn't the case?

After all, Peter doesn't come out of this too well. In fairness, he trusts Jesus enough to get out of the boat and walk towards him, but when he sees the wind and how big the waves are, doubt hits him like a ton of bricks, and he starts to sink, and ends up being rescued by Jesus. How true to life is that? The Christian life can seem simple enough when everything is going swimmingly, but when circumstances turn against us then it can be a different story because that's when your faith is really tested.

A faith that only works in the good times is not going to be much good to us because Jesus was quite clear that if we are going to follow him then we have to take up our cross. By that he means that if we are going to be his disciples there will be trials and testing aplenty. Therefore, the only faith strong enough to cope with that is going to be a faith that helps us to persevere no matter what life throws at us.

So I want us to look at this story this morning from a different perspective. So, I need you to try and put out of your mind all the preconceptions you have about this story and be open to a different interpretation. Let's look at it again.

Let me set the scene for us. Jesus had just heard that John the Baptist has been murdered by Herod. If ever you needed proof that following Jesus can be a risky business then surely this is it. John was a very outspoken guy and when he saw something that was wrong he just couldn't let it go. He felt compelled to do something about it, irrespective of who happened to be involved.

In this case the person involved was King Herod and like a lot of rich and powerful people Herod thought that he was above the law. So he really didn't appreciate having his wrongdoing pointed out to him by this crazy prophet person.

The sad part of this story is that John's rebuke didn't provoke any great change of heart in Herod, because we're told that his immediate impulse is to kill John, and it's only the fear of public opinion that holds him back. Unfortunately for John, Herodias, the other party involved in the unlawful liaison that John condemns, has no such qualms. She sees her opportunity and she manipulates Herod into murdering John. John's disciples bury him and then come and tell Jesus.

Imagine the effect this news must have had on Jesus. John was his cousin, the man who prepared the way for him, brutally murdered by people intent on covering up their own wrongdoing. How hard that must have hit him. But the hardest thing of all, was the knowledge that this was how his own life would end, arrested on trumped up charges, convicted in a rigged trial, and then crucified with the thieves and murderers. John's death was a dress rehearsal for his own.

So, that's why he jumps in a boat to try and get away somewhere remote and quiet to come to terms with the awful news. But things don't work out that way. The crowds follow him and despite the anguish in his own heart, Jesus has compassion on them.

So he spends the whole day teaching and healing people and when evening comes he asks the disciples to feed the 5000 that are still with them at the end of the day.

When they finally get everyone fed it's late and they are all pretty exhausted. For the disciples it's been an amazing day, listening to Jesus teaching and watching miracle after miracle until they get to feed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish.

Now, I want you to imagine that you are one of the disciples, not Peter, just one of the others. Jesus is telling us all to go hop in the boat and take off while he hangs around to send the crowd away and then finally get some time alone. In that moment you're just one of the crew, doing as you're told because Jesus said it. The horizon looks dark and it is probably going to be a tough journey, but oh well... He calls the shots and we just do what he says.

As you get in the boat you find yourself third row back pulling an oar. And in that space you're simply plugging away, and doing what needs to be done to get the boat to its destination.

As the storm increases and things start to get ugly you just keep the head down, trying to pull your weight and get the boat to safety on the other side. When Jesus appears walking on the water you're not thinking, "Oh! I fancy a go at that! Nooo! You just want to stay focused – on keeping going – and not stopping until you get back on dry land.

It would never enter your head to want to get out of the boat and walk on the water! Would it?

You see, it's one thing to sit and listen to a sermon and imagine ourselves as Peter, as adventurous, daring and courageous. But in reality, how many of us are actually like that? I think most of us are happier just plugging away, doing what we're told. And, do you know what? That is exactly what we are asked to do, and exactly what we should be doing. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 5. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces PERSEVERANCE, perseverance character, and character, hope. And hope does

not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Perseverance, just plugging away in spite of our suffering, is what produces character in us, and that character produces hope that keeps us going, no matter what. Paul is saying that this perseverance is integral to the Christian life. He can't imagine the Christian life without it. The writer to the Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with PERSEVERANCE the race marked out for us.”

Peter himself, in 2 Peter 1, says, “For this reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, PERSEVERANCE; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”

The point I am making here, is that when we look at this story imagining ourselves as Peter, we tend to think that it is the grand gesture that God wants from us, like Peter trusting Jesus enough to try walking on water.

The problem with that is if we don't feel up to making that grand gesture then we feel that we are somehow second class Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth! It is the persevering through thick and thin that characterizes the Christian, because it is that perseverance under trial that proves the genuineness of our faith and builds Christian character.

Paul tells the Thessalonians, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” No grand gestures there! It sounds like Paul's talking to the guy pulling an oar in the third row. He's not asking him to walk on water he's just telling him, “Keep doing what you're doing. Just keep plugging away.” Paul reminds them of all that he instructed them to do and he tells them to do those things “more and more.” Why does he say that?

Jesus wants them and us to persevere, to keep plugging away, through the wind and the waves of life, so that our daily lives win the respect of outsiders. If the folk around us, who aren't believers, see us persevering through all that life throws at us then the power of God is revealed to them. They see first-hand what a difference our faith makes, that we're not quitters. They will want to know the source of the hope that keeps us going in situations where they would feel only despair.

John Ortberg wrote that book ‘If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat’, but no one has written ‘If You Want to Get to the Other Side You Have to Keep Rowing’. It is distinctly less glamorous, but much of life is just that – keeping going and doing what is needed. Persevering, even when the wind and the waves are against you. Many of you have said to me at different times that you could never get up at the front and speak, that you're happier being in the background, and that is absolutely fine. What is not fine is that you seem to feel that what you do is not that important. But I want to say to you today that every one of you is important.

There are people on your frontline and their only contact with the gospel is what they see in your lives and hear from your lips, and it is the job of this church to disciple you and equip

you to do that job to the best of your ability. Now, I am not saying that that's going to be easy. Far from it! In fact it is a very hard job and you need to have real faith to keep plugging away each and every day. Perseverance does not come easy, to me it is every bit as hard as attempting to walk on water. But that is our true calling! All through the New Testament we are called to persevere and it's important that we do! James, in his letter, gives us some practical advice on how to persevere. Just listen to this little snippet, ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

It takes perseverance in the face of adversity to produce maturity and completeness in you, but when it is finished you will lack absolutely nothing. Does that sound like second best to you? No? It doesn't sound like second best to me either. In fact it sounds every bit as impressive as walking on water. We are all conscious of the areas in our lives that aren't quite up to scratch, aren't we? So what must it be like to lack nothing, to have that sense of completeness, to be fully mature.

Like I was saying at the start, Peter's water-walking exploits weren't his finest hour because he didn't persevere. When his faith was tested it wasn't up to the job. And this wasn't a one-off! On several other occasions when his faith was tested he chickened out then too! In fact, it wasn't until Pentecost when he was filled with the Holy Spirit that Peter's faith came into its own. I think that should tell us that the life of faith is not something that we can do in our own strength. It's a gift, just like everything else.

But just because we can't do it in our own strength doesn't mean we should sit back and wait for God to do it all for us. You see, in the life of faith, there is no such thing as standing still. If you stop moving forward then you start to drift back, back into old ways that will never win the respect of outsiders. Being a disciple doesn't just demand perseverance, it demands effort too. The Spirit does change us from the inside out but we have to cooperate with Him, looking for opportunities to live for Jesus in our daily lives.

Maybe it's no coincidence that many of the sayings we have in English to describe effort originate from rowing. At some point somebody has probably told you to put your back into it, or to pull your weight. These expressions come from rowing, and it's easy to see why they bring to mind real effort. Rowing is hard work ---- but its great exercise. In fact it's one of the best exercises there is, because, if you are rowing properly, you are using almost every muscle in your body. If you row on a regular basis you will become big and strong and fit, and the rowing will become easier and you will actually start to enjoy it.

If you have ever watched rowing at the Olympics or the Oxford and Cambridge boat race rowing looks quite simple and straightforward, but it's not. Those crews have spent endless hours training and being coached to get to that stage of perfect synchronization where they all move in unison, all pulling together in perfect harmony, and the boat just flies through the water. Imagine if we all pulled together as a church, encouraging and spurring each other on towards love and good deeds, as Paul puts it. Making it our goal to see every member of this community disciplined and equipped to carry out the role that Jesus has given us, modelling God's new community and being his witnesses where we live, work and play.

Imagine this church, empowered and guided by the Spirit, flying along like one of those racing boats, everyone pulling together in perfect harmony, a thing of grace and beauty. An impossible dream? Maybe you think it is, but remember, nothing is impossible for God.

Praise: My Lighthouse

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: 10000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)

Benediction